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ABSTRACT

This portrait of a middle school literature classroom is one of a series of several such portraits which depict diverse classroom settings of high school literature, and which result from the second year of a teacher-research project in the greater Albany, New York area. This article portrays teacher Will Blake and his honors class at an urban middle school exploring Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn," and notes the sense of community in Blake's classroom which allows for many learners and many teachers. (SR)

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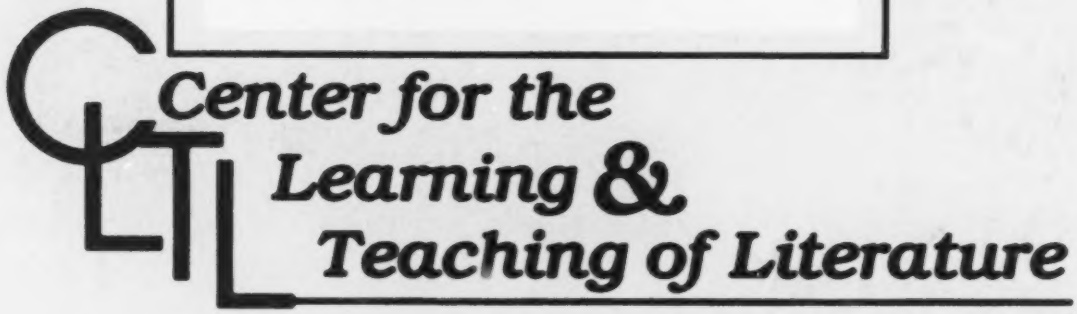
Will Blake: Teaching and Learning Huckleberry Finn

Susan Burke



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Will Blake: Teaching and Learning Huckleberry Finn

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Report Series 2.12

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Center-sponsored research falls into three broad areas: 1) surveys of current practice in the teaching of literature, including studies of both what is taught and how it is taught; 2) studies of alternative approaches to instruction and their effects on students' knowledge of literature and critical-thinking abilities; and 3) studies of alternative approaches to the assessment of literature achievement, including both classroom-based and larger-scale approaches to testing.

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Preface

Reading Teacher's Stories

The following portrait of high school literature classrooms results from the second year of a teacher-research project, sponsored by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, concerned with depicting diverse classroom settings of high school literature instruction. Last year's report, "Teaching Literature in High School: A Teacher-Research Project" (Report Series 2.2, April, 1989) offered extensive detail about the goals and methods of our work, along with an explanation of the philosophical assumptions associated with it. We refer interested readers to that essay, and to the teacher narratives that it introduces, all available from the Center, for a fuller understanding of what we will summarize only cursorily here. The narratives that have been produced this year are all new, though the activities that have led to their production are identical to those of the previous year. The high school teachers who have graciously, indeed we might say bravely, offered us glimpses of their classrooms are also new to the project, representing a range of urban and suburban, honors and average, literature programs from the greater Albany, New York area. These teachers are identified in the stories by pseudonyms. Several of the teacher-researchers engaged in last year's work have continued with the research group. They include Ann Connolly of Bethlehem Central High School, Carol Forman-Pemberton of Burnt Hills/Ballston Lake, Tricia Hansbury-Zuendt of Canajoharie, and Doris Quick, recently retired from Burnt Hills and now teaching at Union College. In addition, two new researchers have joined the group, Susan Burke of Guilderland Schools, and John Danaher, who teaches at Shaker High School in North Colonie.

A growing body of theory and scholarship is devoted to legitimizing the concept and practice of teacher inquiry, so that its integrity as a mode of investigation no longer requires elaborate defense. More important, growing numbers of teachers are adding to the stock of formal knowledge about classroom life in such collections as Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change, eds., Dixie Goswami and Peter Stillman (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton, 1987) and Seeing for Ourselves: Case Study Research by Teachers of Writing, eds., Glenda Bissex and Richard Bullock (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987). As a result, the substantiveness of teacher knowledge, whether in the form of "case study" or that of classroom "story," is no longer hypothetical but is open to view in the public record. While there are differences of opinion among its advocates about the technical means of teacher inquiry, there is broad agreement that teachers have distinctive vantage points on what happens in classrooms, quite separate from those of educational researchers, leading them to a concrete, "phenomenal" understanding of school life that deserves to be regarded as authentic "knowledge," not just subjective impression or idiosyncratic anecdote. Their knowledge is that of the insider, whose "felt sense" of the school world, expressed typically in the form of narrative reflection, stands to enrich our sense of classroom life.

We have argued in general terms, as others have, for the usefulness of teacher stories, their value in enhancing teachers' reflectiveness about their instructional practices and settings, both in last year's research report and elsewhere (cf. "Knowing Our Language: A

Phenomenological Basis for Teacher Research," in Audits of Meaning: A Festschrift for Ann E. Berthoff, ed., Louise Z. Smith, Portsmouth, NH: Boynton; Heinemann, 1988). It remains here for readers to see for themselves the kind and quality of learning that stories make available, remembering that there are important differences between the sort of knowledge that comes from stories and that available from the discursive prose of conventional educational research. Stories depict and dramatize the life-world. They evoke; they do not assert. They are immersed in the particularity of actual experience, aiming at richness of event rather then simplicity or conciseness of statement. Stories do not, cannot, insist on their readings; instead, they bring their readers into the act of construing meaning. Themes emerge for attentive readers, and they have the effect of proposing a coherence for the text; but two readers will not always compose the same themes. Moreover, no thematic judgment will permanently reduce the complexity of the story itself: it is reread for new insights, altered meanings. Stories endlessly modify other stories; readings endlessly modify other readings.

Whatever individual readers see in these stories is something to share with others who may well have learned something else or more from the same texts. The value of the stories lies finally in the fact that they offer a context for conversation among teachers. The fuller that conversation, the more stories available to sustain it, the greater the gain in a qualitatively improved awareness of the meaningfulness of classroom life. By reproducing the life-world of school teaching and learning apart from the immediacy of teachers' actual engagement in that world, classroom narratives create the tranquil, objectified conditions needed for reflection while still retaining teachers' intuitive recognition of the complexities of their experience. Stories don't tell teachers what to do; they simply portray people doing, and also thinking and feeling. Watching others in action, readers also see themselves. Discovering personally meaningful themes in the stories, readers find coherence and support for their own professional work.

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Will Blake: Teaching and Learning Huckleberry Finn

Susan Burke
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> When I reread Twain I'll do it with Alicia's concept of eavesdropping in my head. I especially hadn't thought of it as a repetitive device, a practical way of allowing the narrator to reveal information.

Alicia is an eighth-grade student in teacher Will Blake's honors class at Alice Walker Middle School, one of two middle schools in an upstate New York city. Her class has just finished reading Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Will Blake is the learner quoted above.

The complex issues of teaching and learning are further complicated for me by my questions about who is to teach and who is to learn. What happens when the traditional roles - adult as knower and teacher, child as seeker and learner - become upset? When I proposed to Will that I come into his classroom to look at the learning and teaching of literature, I didn't know what he would allow me to see, but from the first it was clear that Will was most comfortable with the kind of shared responsibility for learning and teaching that I had wondered about and experimented with in my own classroom.

Only nine miles of interstate highway separate my school from Will's. My modern suburban building sits across the road from a golf course and its playing fields border a townhouse development where rents tip toward a thousand dollars a month. Will's sprawling gray federal-style building overlooks a low cost housing project, just a few city blocks from Dewey Avenue - described by one eighth grader as "the drug street." Will's two older sons have gone through grades five through eight in my building. He chooses to teach at Alice Walker. But he does more than drive the twenty minutes from the suburbs into the city each day, teach his classes and escape to watch his sons play soccer at 3:30. Will has a stake in urban education. He spends hours working on the City-wide School Improvement Committee. Politicians control many aspects of education in this city - the school board, hiring at every level, budget allocations. Politics cloud many issues, create partnerships and alliances that must be taken into account in any plan of action. The bureaucratic tentacles reach from the downtown Board of Education Office into every principal's office, every faculty room across the city. Will is smart about all of this, in the same way his students from the projects are street smart. In a situation they didn't create and can't control they have the savvy to find the ways to make the system at least tolerable. Will would like more than an uneasy truce with the system and sees his work with the Committee as a means to a better end. As he relates a lengthy debate with a school board member on the subject of teacher professionalism, his sense of wonder and wry humor betray the fact that he is learning at every step about working within the system even as he struggles to change it.

> Will is learning in his classroom too.

Will's building is divided into wings, each defined by a bold color - red, orange, yellow. He meets his students in a room in the orange wing painted an electric green, a color unnatural and aggressive. Will stands in the doorway, a short, bearded, barrel-chested man. His look is

intense. I think of Jonathan Edwards in the pulpit poised to deliver his "sinners in the hands of an angry God" sermon. Then Will smiles and the stern, disapproving reverend vanishes. His look is direct, not menacing. His eyes twinkle. Ceilings are high and floors bare, so the sounds of voices, lockers slamming, desks being jostled aside by the exiting third period class compete with Will as he reminds those leaving about the assignment due tomorrow and those arriving about the materials they will need for class.

In the room students shift desks into clusters of four or five and wait for Will's directions before settling down to begin work. The students have finished reading Huckleberry Finn and each of them has identified a theme to explore in a major paper. Will distributes a packet of questions to each student. They aren't his questions, but a compilation of student questions.

During an earlier class period in the computer center, students had been asked to generate a few questions from the novel, taught to save that file, then asked to try to answer their own questions and taught to save the second file. They quickly learned how the desktop function of Appleworks could enable them to move from file to file. Will printed copies of the questions to be distributed and used as prompts for other questions that might be raised in small group discussion. Each student receives a copy of the complete class set of questions. They include Nicole's concerns:

1. The wife tricking Huck into revealing he was a boy. What does it say about girls being unique in Twain's society?

2. What was it about Huck's upbringing that made his decision whether to turn Jim in a big moral issue?

3. Why does Huck try to be like Tom?

4. What was the impact of Huck's father's drinking problem on Huck?

5. Why did Huck tolerate the King and the Duke?

6. What does Twain want us to see after the widow goes back on her promise not to sell Jim?

7. Did Twain purposely only have male characters eavesdrop?

8. What did Twain have to say about society when he had the whole lynch mob proven cowards? Did he side with the mob or the criminal?

9. Why does Tom drag out the rescue of Jim?

Lucretia wonders:

> Why did Huck lose interest in learning about Moses and the Bulrushes? Was he really in a sweat to learn about Moses? How do people react to Huck's excitement?

Annisha asks:

> Does Twain have anything against going to church or Bible meetings because he makes his characters look very unintelligent?

Damion questions:

> What was meant by "SICK ARAB-BUT HARMLESS WHEN NOT OUT OF HIS HEAD"? (pg. 152 Chap. XXIV)

Leon poses:

1. How is Huck approached by the Grangerfords and why?

2. When Huck is at the Grangerfords house what are his feelings towards the dead daughter? Explain them.

3. Why does Huck have mixed feelings towards Jim in the raft settings?

4. How did the woman in the shanty by the ferry landing outsmart Huck? At the end of the visit who was outsmarted?

5. How did Huck's father relate to most of the people in his town? Use specific references to text.

Will instructs the students to consider the questions they have been given, to generate additional questions and to begin to arrive at some answers to questions that interest them. He suggests they begin to tie their questions to the theme of the novel, reminds them to emphasize those things not previously discussed in class and speaks to them of the importance of their own agendas. He tells them to take notes so they can footnote this discussion in their papers, and encourages them to raise questions in their groups that they have been struggling with in their own reading. Each group will present its work to the class the following day.

While the students shuffle notebooks and try to find perches for the tape recorders I've provided for each group, I think how different this class looks from my fourth period group. For one thing, it's smaller - considerably smaller. Nineteen honors students compared to my twenty-six homogeneously grouped eighth-graders. There is a racial mix here too. Nine of Will's students this period are white; all of my students are. The teenage trappings are the same though. Will's students and mine appear to shop at the same mall. I make a note to pay more attention in the halls to see if this is true of all Alice Walker Middle School students. (It isn't!)

As the students work, Will circulates, hunkers down at the edge of a group, listens attentively, asks a question. "If that's the case, why did Twain. . .?" The question posed, conversation started or redirected, Will moves on. "What does this have to do with what Twain is saying to America? Pick it up. See where you can go."

Will is a Twain enthusiast. His students know that. He had, after all, introduced them to Twain last year through Tom Sawyer. Will's students will all have read the two major works taught in seventh- and eighth-grade; most will have read four or five additional Twain pieces

by the end of grade eight. They will, he hopes, be knowledgeable about how Twain wrote, have considered a number of issues related to the works, and have examined the controversy surrounding Huckleberry Finn. All will have written a major paper on some issue in Twain's work that particularly interests them. Will encourages students to read additional literature related to the works studied in class. He brings into the classroom as many books by and about Twain as he can locate in local public and college libraries. He provides copies of papers written by students in years past. He schedules time for students to explore and to talk. He encourages them to ask questions of and about the text as they are involved in reading it.

Will clearly knows a lot about Mark Twain. What strikes me about his literature classes is that he isn't particularly eager to tell what he knows. But Annika is. Her group listens in awed silence as she reads, in answer to her own questions, a footnote clarifying an obscure point from the annotated version of Huckleberry Finn she found at the main branch of the city library. Damion's group accuses him of not having completed the reading. He looks sheepish, admits nothing, and continues to interject irrelevant and incorrect information. The girls discussing Twain's view of religion digress about their own Sunday school experience and begin to sing a snatch of a favorite hymn.

I marvel at several things as I watch this class. The questions! Though some, like Leon's, "How did Huck's father relate to most of the people in his town? Use specific references to text," sound carefully modeled on traditional teacher questions designed to sort out those who have not read closely, others seemed to get at things readers might actually wonder about. "Why does Huck have mixed feelings towards Jim in the raft settings?" was a question also submitted by Leon. Students knew when they were generating this batch of questions that they would be shared with others in the class, that some would be explored and perhaps even answered. How authentic are they? The students who wrestled with Huck's feeling about Jim may provide an answer.

STUDENT: In the event you read Huckleberry Finn, how does Huckleberry Finn feel towards Jim?

STUDENT: I think that Huck treats Jim as an equal, I think. They're friends. It's not like he's a slave and he runs around calling him "nigger."

STUDENT: That's true. Yeah.

STUDENT: Okay. Huck thinks Jim is neat. I think he treats him more as a friend that like-

STUDENT: Or as a black person.

STUDENT: No, more like a friend, like a kid because the way he is playing jokes on him and stuff.

STUDENT: Yeah. Jim's like 40-something, 30-something years old.

STUDENT: Yeah. And it's not like -- it's like he plays jokes on the family and Tom Sawyer. It's like in case it wasn't maybe like another person who was in the town who wasn't like so fun -- I don't know. It just seems like he treats him

more as a friend his age, though he is 40 years old.

STUDENT: The kids in the story don't seem to be caring. Like they don't even know what slavery is. I mean, they don't even know --

STUDENT: That was only by their parents and stuff.

STUDENT: So that's why I enjoy the story. Because it doesn't deal with all the problems that adults have back there. Kids are more free and everything.

STUDENT: Jim -- I mean, not Jim. Huck has no choice but to treat him right. They're on a raft. They're floating. They're not going to --

STUDENT: But that's not the way that he thinks though. That's not the way that he thinks.

STUDENT: That's not what I'm saying. But he has no choice. Like they're going to fight on a raft.

STUDENT: He does have a choice. He didn't have to take him.

STUDENT: I mean when they were on the raft.

STUDENT: Yeah, but when they were on the raft he could have pushed him overboard or something.

STUDENT: I know. But since they're friends he didn't do that.

STUDENT: Wouldn't it have been funny?

STUDENT: He, like, pushes him off.

STUDENT: Okay. Then I think that -- I don't know, it sort of has -- I think that the way that they - that they interact with each other is really -- it's hard to describe that.

STUDENT: It's miraculous because people today --

STUDENT: It is a special relationship. Because they knew how to treat people. You know, they didn't have all that prejudice and everything.

STUDENT: I know. Between those two --

STUDENT: I think also, you know, Huck cares for Jim because, you know, when he has to make a decision whether to turn you know, Jim into the police -- yeah -- or help him, you know, get him a free person.

STUDENT: What I don't understand is that Huckleberry Finn has changed totally from Tom Sawyer because if it was he would have pushed him off the boat, turned him

into the police and everything else.

STUDENT: I was wondering. Do you think like well maybe they both just want to play a big joke on everybody but --

STUDENT: Yeah.

STUDENT: How Jim -- and like when they get together they know that --

STUDENT: I don't really think that they think it's funny though.

STUDENT: No, I mean when they first -- you know, started reading it. It's like you can see it in that way.

STUDENT: I think when -- when Huck first meets Jim he becomes the more mature because they always have --

STUDENT: Jim has an influence on him.

STUDENT: Yeah.

STUDENT: You know Jim is the older character.

STUDENT: I don't know. He acts just like the kids though. Yeah, he acts like Jim but he doesn't change a lot. He's not as --

STUDENT: In a way he changes Huck. Huck's not playing practical jokes when he is with Jim.

STUDENT: He feels guilty and -- I think he gets to be more mature. At the beginning he wasn't. He wasn't that mature.

TEACHER: Just keep asking that question. Why does that happen?

Will is sincerely interested in his students' questions. He provides them with a model which allows them to analyze literature from a number of perspectives, to raise questions on several levels.

Theme

Author work Audience =

Personal Reaction

As he listens, he frequently interjects in ways that connect students with the model - important to them since their papers must trace their selected themes through the model as it applies to Twain. Will explains how the model can empower students:

I use the diagram as a question-generating diagram. They can deal with the author and his background and ask questions like how did the 19th century affect Twain so that he writes the way he writes. . .talk about the river, talk about American Protestant thought at that time. . .talk about the nature of slavery at that time and talk about Twain's own life, his own feelings and how those things are intersected. His own tremendous guilt, for example, comes out of that whole American Protestant movement and finds its way into his fiction.

Then moving into the work - that's where we can break the piece of writing to its parts,. . .plot, setting, character and generate those kinds of questions. Who were the characters? What's the central conflict, complication and resolution? What does the setting look like? It's a description of the work itself. . .there's a whole question-generating section there.

There are certain questions that can be generated with the audience, probably not as many with fiction as there are for advertisement and other forms of nonfiction, but Twain wrote to a 19th-century audience. He's having difficulties with a 20th-century audience. Many groups want to ban the book. We talk a little bit about that.

On the other side, what I like very much is that I've found a way to talk about the tunings of literature. On college campuses they only talk about one. They let you talk about the theme and then they make you prove that by going back to the work. Very, very rarely are you allowed to talk about how that theme affects you, and yet the meaning that comes out of a work. . .I mean when we come out of Huckleberry Finn and we talk about conning, the whole art of conning and compare it with Eddie Murphy movies we also talk about what we do. . .conning that we've done in our lives. What the model allows me to do for kids is say there is a certain meaning the author intended and we call it a theme and we can all agree on that and we can go to the work to try to prove it. If we disagree it depends on our proof whether we're right or not. Specific reference to text determines the validity of what we say, but there's another piece of meaning down here called personal reaction and how we feel. What happens to us?

We don't always know exactly what the author wanted us to appreciate, if the meaning was what we got out of it, so that also gives us a place to become writers ourselves - creative writers.

After listening for a few moments in one group, Will observes, "This is not the same Huckleberry Finn as was in Tom Sawyer. Why does Twain have this happen? What is Twain trying to say?" Students tentatively venture their responses, revise, and generally work toward an answer that will satisfy them all. Collaborative peer revision is important in Will's class - in literature study/reading and in writing. "It starts," Will says, "when they own the right to interpret, even poorly."

What I see are readers who not only have the right, but the responsibility for interpretation. I wonder about the situations in which this is possible for kids. These are honors students. They are articulate, assured, armed for this discussion. In this respect they are very much like the suburban students I see. Where does this authority as a reader come from? Will's students worked with him last year too, but if they hadn't, if they had had a teacher who held tight rather than shared that authority, would they be able to do what I see them doing?

As I reflect, Will is asking them to be sure their notes indicate what the group has decided. Some students scribble frantically, others jot down brief reminders. He suggests that students plan to reread those sections of the text mentioned in group discussion that they do not recall clearly. Careful scholarship is expected.

The class has faced problems as it worked. Some questions are richer than others, some students have done more careful first readings of the text, some lost time as they debated about which questions to tackle, some group members were more assertive about putting their own agendas forward, but their messages from Will were clear. He values their questions. The simple act of gathering and printing each student's work for distribution confers authority upon the student effort. The questions were important not because everyone needed to be able to construct an answer, but because they might generate further questions. Answers were helpful if they moved students toward the meaning of the text, but each group controlled the decision about what part it would explore.

Will had worked with students in advance to determine groupings that would reflect a mixture of race and sex as well as representative hidden agendas (themes to be explored in the culminating writing assignment). Will's mention of the individual student agenda at the outset of the discussion reminded students of another important area of responsibility. Not only would it be acceptable practice for a student to raise her own questions for group discussion, she should refer to and footnote any response that was useful to her in the final paper. The authority of student response would be valued right along with that of Twain scholars.

The notion of hidden agendas intrigues me. I had always attributed them to manipulative administrators, not to students. But Will explained:

> When my students do their final paper on Twain they have to pick a theme that they want to live with, say women, or curiosity, or mischievousness, something they really get interested in and have to trace that theme throughout that model as it applies to Twain. So in the author section they have to ask themselves, was Twain mischievous in his own life? If so, how? What do the 19th-century Americans think about being mischievous? They have to show how Twain dealt with mischievousness as part of the plot. Where the characters were mischievous. What were the 19th-century Americans thinking about being mischievous? What were the problems involved? What did mischief mean to the audience and what kinds of attitudes about mischief did they bring to the work itself and if mischief is a theme of a particular work, then they discuss that - what was Twain saying about being mischievous in America in his work? It's bigger than just the character doing something mischievous. They may then have a personal reaction. That can be anything. It can be a piece of art. It could be a piece of original fiction, a poem, anything with mischief. It is not only on the theme of mischief, but it also truly comes out of the experience of mischief in Twain.
>
> When students go to their groups they can discuss any questions they like, but each student is sitting there with a topic and wondering what she's going to write, thinking maybe she could get some information if she could lead the discussion in that direction.

Will's posture as he worked with groups that day sent a message too. Speaking from a crouching position that made him about level with the students, he appeared to be another

group member for the few minutes he was there. Listening was key to his participation. His question for each group appeared to grow from a kind of quick analysis of what the group needed to consider next to move it along. He left students with one question or suggestion to ponder, not an additional list of questions.

I am struck by Will's apparent sincerity. In spite of all he says and the consistency of his actions with his language, I wonder if students see that he has a stake in the learning, not just the teaching, in that classroom. Will Blake knows a great deal about literature, about Twain, about the 19th century. What about his hidden agenda?

* *

Student presentations begin on a shaky note the following day when Rita is reluctant to join her group at the front of the room. Will explains his expectation that each student will participate with her group and reminds her that she shared good ideas in conversation the day before. The question under discussion is, "Was Twain supporting the idea that blacks were property and could be bought or sold?"

Group/Annie: We were deciding if Twain was supporting the idea that like, they were property and they could be bought and sold and whether he was against it. And we talked about how religion encouraged prejudice because they said you would go to hell if you helped someone run away.

Student: Why don't you say some of the things you said about those issues.

Group/Annie: We thought that religion helped prejudice grow a lot because they taught the kids that they'd go to hell if they ever helped some run away or if they ever helped a black person out.

Student: Do you think he [Twain] was prejudiced or non-prejudiced?

Group/Annie: We don't know. We kind of thought he wasn't because he had. . .Huck's point of view.

Group/Leon: I wrote that Jim was smarter than Huck, like the hariball incident where he outsmarted Huck and then Huck is either giving Jim up or keeping him for a friend. He decided to keep him for a friend. I think that's kind of Twain's way of saying that he would rather steal Jim and keep him than give him back up.

Student: About what Leon said, how do you think an adult would react in this situation?

Group/Leon: To what situation?

Student: About giving him up.

Group/Leon: Uh. Probably since Huck was a kid I guess he didn't know. But it depended on whether you were prejudiced or not. Maybe if you were someone from the North that wasn't prejudiced you would probably help them stay. . .like. . .it just depends on how. . .

Student: Why was he afraid to tell Mrs. Watson?

Group/Annie: Because he thought she would get mad that he was stealing her property.

Do you have any questions?

Will: Why don't you try to talk about what you just spoke about. There are three separate issues. Why don't you try to classify them according to that model? Start with the latest one if you want to and we'll remind you about what you covered before - Monica's question, what would an adult have done in Huck's position - and kind of see where it would fit. We're going to discuss it.

What do you think Deanna? Where would it fit? Monica's question - Do you remember Monica's question?

Group/Deana: Uh-huh. Probably in, like, 19th-century point of view.

Group/Leon: Probably depended how you were raised. If you were raised to think that blacks were property and maybe if you had lived around a place where they were selling blacks all the time, you'd think that they were just property.

Student: I don't agree with you. I think that any adult would have given him [Jim] back up.

Group/Annie: Oh, yeah they would, like, have given him. . .

Student: I don't think it would have depended on whether you were prejudiced or not.

Group/Leon: Well, if you were prejudiced. . .

2nd Student: Well, also I don't agree with you because the decision may not mean I'm prejudiced - but Huck is young and adults are older and they might have a different reason for. . .not just because they were prejudiced or not. Do you understand?

3rd Student: I don't think it's right to say that all adults would have brought him back. You can't say all kids. . .can't make generalizations like that because you don't know every single person. . .people are individuals.

Will: In all of your comments you are now trying to discover how 19th-century people would have acted. Does that make sense to everybody? Can everybody see that? Does it fit in that part of the model?

Class: The audience.

Will: The audience section in the 19th century. O.K. Do you see how that would help your papers yet?

Will does not speak until he believes the group has exhausted itself; then he directs their thinking toward the model. He reminds students of their own work on Twain and their responsibility to gather and use relevant material from class discussion. Even Rita, who has remained apart from her group in spite of Will's admonition, is eventually compelled by the discussion to participate.

Will sits at his desk in the back of the room taking notes, monitoring the discussion when groups have difficulty with this task, reminding students of the purpose of the presentation. Along with the formal recording represented by his note-taking, Will is noticing problems. He is surprised to learn that students are continuing to have difficulty relating their discussion/thinking to the model. He stops to review the parts of the model and take students through it, using Monica's assertion that any adult character in the book would have given Jim up. He notices, too, that students' notes are not as helpful to them as he had hoped. He learns what he needs to teach.

As a learner in Will's classroom, I have questions too. How do we create environments in our schools where students can feel free to challenge text, teachers and each other? As teachers, what do we do and say to students to let them know we are not expecting them to simply play at being scholars, that we are authentically interested in learning with them? What would it feel like to be a student sitting in a class taught by a teacher expert, one who claims to be terribly interested in hearing what you have to say? Would I suspect insincerity, or worse yet, trickery?

What is our responsibility in dealing with comments like Leon's: "It was the law that not any people in the North were prejudiced?" Not only is the statement inaccurate, the attitude that prejudice is a resolved issue is disturbing. How many teaching opportunities slip by us? Certainly not all instructional decisions can be made as we plan for our teaching.

I wonder about Will's model. His goal in using it is to encourage students to approach a piece of literature from a number of different perspectives - as questioners. He doesn't want students to be dependent upon other people's questions, but to be confident in their ability to ask what is problematic or intriguing to them. The model is presented as a neutral context out of which these kinds of questions might grow, but the notions of author, history, time and audience seem hugely complex to me. What do they mean to a young reader? Does the model determine the questions? What would happen if we just left students alone to struggle with text as readers and writers do in the world beyond school?

Will provides resources to support his classroom study of Huckleberry Finn. In addition to the Twain text and thirty to thirty-five Twain-related books, fiction and nonfiction, which Will has selected from the public and university libraries and brought into the classroom, students have copies of articles written to mark the 100th anniversary of the publication of the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, reprinted from the New York Times and USA Today: "From Twain, a Letter on Debt to Blacks," "Mark Twain, in the Year of 'Huck Finn,' Aided Black Law Student at Yale," "Is 'Huck Finn' too Strong for Today's Teenagers?," "And Huck's Censors," "Huck's River Revisited." They also have papers written by Will's eighth-graders from previous years.

Writing by Fred Hechinger of the New York Times staff and Richard Bucci, associate editor of the Mark Twain Project of the Bancroft Library at the University of California in

Berkeley, is read, discussed, and quoted along with the writing of Ron Dutton, high school junior, who wrote about women in Twain and Sarah Hall, ninth-grader, who examined Twain's use of mischief a few years ago.

Will devotes two class periods to specific study of student-produced text. Students select pieces that might be related to their own work, read and talk about these with students sitting near them. Everything about the piece is open for discussion - content, writing style, interpretation. Again, Will encourages students to work collaboratively, to pass work on to others they know might have a specific interest, to cite student writers in their work. Will's inclusion of these pieces as resources for readers working to make and broaden meaning create a further sense of student authority.

The sense of community in Will's classroom allows for many learners, many teachers. Will learned about teaching. His students didn't read quickly enough this year. The length of time devoted to Twain study may need to be shortened next time, perhaps more quizzes would make students read more quickly and carefully. He noticed that black students didn't seem to get into the issue of Jim as a character, none of the papers dealt with any of the racial themes, students took stands in their papers but didn't get excited. He learned about mentoring. Two of his students requested his help in preparing their papers for publication in the Twain Quarterly. One eighth-grader asked Will to put her in touch with a student writer who is now a high school junior. They began by writing to each other and now talk together. Will learned about literature. "I know the difference between a minor and a major work of literature. It's a minor work if no kid is saying new things about it." And that would be a real disappointment to Will Blake.